

ALDO VAN EYCK PARTNER IN CRIME OF COBRA

Esther Schreuder

'When he lived in the centre of Amsterdam, we never failed to visit him. We were always sure to find some intellectual nourishment at his place. It was like spring in the desert.'

Pierre Alechinsky on Aldo van Eyck



Postcard from Corneille and Constant from Denmark to Aldo van Eyck, Lot 1006.

In the spring of 1947, twenty-six-year-old Constant Nieuwenhuys visited twenty-eight-year-old Aldo van Eyck at his Amsterdam home. Constant had heard that Van Eyck and his wife, Hannie van Rooijen, owned works by the surrealist Juan Miró. This was true: Van Eyck had spent the war years in Zürich and, through art historian Carola Giedion Welcker, had come into contact with avant-garde artists. Van Eyck became interested in Cubism, De Stijl, Dada, Surrealism, and more. With a very modest budget, he acquired small works, received photographs from art dealer Albert Skira, met artists like Kurt Schwitters, Brancusi and befriended Hans Arp. Van Eyck felt such a kinship with Arp that he converted one of his drawings into a wooden relief "painting" in Zürich. Arp was enthusiastic about the result and signed it.



Constantin Brancusi, Vue d'atelier, lot nr. 1083



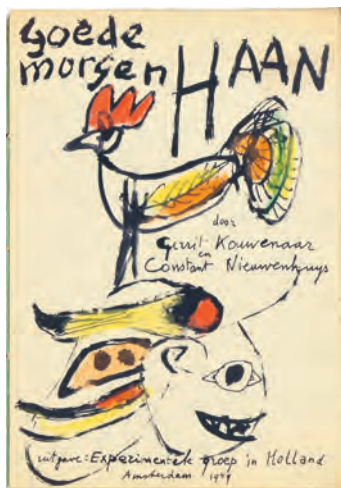
Max Ernst, Le coeur à gaz, 1946, lot nr. 1035



Paul Klee, Seiltänzer, 1923, lot nr. 1009

After the Second World War, Aldo and his wife moved to Amsterdam, first to Keizergracht 27 and in November 1947 to Binnenkant 32. They would remain there until 1965, and many artists came to see the works they had purchased and received. At their house works by European avant-garde artists were displayed in compositions with traditional artworks from Oceania, Africa, and the Americas. It was here that Constant, soon joined by Corneille and Karel Appel, immediately recognized a shared drive with Van Eyck: a belief in creativity, intuition, and pure imagination, and a desire to break away from a rigid, exhausted Western artistic tradition.

A year later, in 1948, the artists founded the Experimentele Groep Nederland, with their own journal *Reflex*, which included a manifesto by Constant. Constant: 'A painting is not a construction of colours and lines, but an animal, a night, a cry, a human being, or all of these together'. That same year, writers also joined. Soon afterwards, *Goede Morgen Haan* (Good Morning Rooster) appeared, a collaboration between Constant and the poet Gerrit Kouwenaar, featuring hand-coloured drawings by the artist and texts by the writer. Aldo van Eyck received no 22, in an edition of 30, signed by both.



Constant and Gerrit Kouwenaar, *Goede Morgen Haan* 1949 lot nr. 1028



One of the aims of the Experimentele Groep Nederland was to seek like-minded artists abroad. To this end, they travelled to Paris, where they attended a surrealist conference in search of kindred spirits. Disappointed, they withdrew together with others. Alongside artists from Denmark and Belgium, they went on to found Cobra in November 1948. The Belgian artist Christian Dotremont came up with the name, it stands for Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. At its heart, Cobra was collective and cross-border – “a difficult-to-define, mutually influencing whirlpool,” as Christian Dotremont put it. It was above all the collective activities that made Cobra into a movement. Their common ground was to express themselves spontaneously, where anything was possible. Free from reason and logic. Embracing raw energy and primal instincts. This now international group of artists also began producing its own magazines and booklets, under the title *Bibliothèque de Cobra*. In one issue of *Cobra*, Aldo is listed as editor.

One of their many sources of inspiration, alongside materiality, folk art and symbols, was children's drawings.



Constant, *Ecole des méchants (zondagsschool)* 1949, lot nr. 1029



Karel Appel, *Elephant, bird and fish*, 1949 (present for Van Eyck's daughter Tess) lot nr. 1015



To support the artists, Van Eyck began buying their works. Corneille on Van Eyck: *'He has the temperament of a fighter. The people who, in those early years, saw something in our work could be counted on the fingers of two hands'*. Theo Wolvecamp, for example, sold his first work to Van Eyck – an enormous stimulus. For Wolvecamp, Miró was a major inspiration, and his starting point was the white canvas, on which he made stains before working further. He was highly self-critical and discarded much. Appel sometimes took these rejected works with him to rework. It was permitted to alter earlier works by other artists – a practice known as **modifications**.



Theo Wolvecamp, Compositie 7.9, 1949, lot nr. 1033

The International Exhibition of Experimental Art/CoBrA in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1949.

A year after the foundation of Cobra, Constant asked Van Eyck to design their first exhibition, *Internationale Tentoonstelling van Experimentele kunst in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1949*, spread across seven galleries of the Stedelijk Museum. Van Eyck approached the task intuitively, inspired by Piet Mondrian. He composed planes in space with paintings and placed prints and objects on platforms on the floor. To complete his vision, he asked the artists to produce several large, striking works especially for these rooms.

Van Eyck: *'I had nothing for the walls except paintings. Or nothing? Nothing in the right size to take on those huge galleries. So I thought: we need a few large things'*.

The Japanese-American artist Shinkichi Tajiri on his First meeting with Van Eyck at the exhibition: *'It was as if a whirlwind swept past, gesturing fiercely with his arms, producing a stream of clearly articulated sentences'*.

Not all artists were enthusiastic about Aldo's design.

The older artists, Eugène Brands, and Anton Rooskens, in particular, struggled with it. But the others were very positive. Alechinsky, the youngest participant: *'He took possession of the space by exploiting the empty space to the maximum, by creating a play of tensions between the negative and the positive'*.



Joan Miró, Untitled 1938 lot nr. 1038



Aldo van Eyck with Tony Appel, during the creation of the CoBrA exhibition in Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 1949. Photo E. Kok

Tajiri: *'The way he hung paintings at floor level or two metres high was my first encounter with the concept of environment. The paintings thereby had no secondary role; in the carefully determined space allotted to them, they actually gained in meaning.'*

Constant: *'Those layouts, I thought they were splendid.'*

Corneille: *'It would have been hard for us to manage without Aldo's contribution.'*

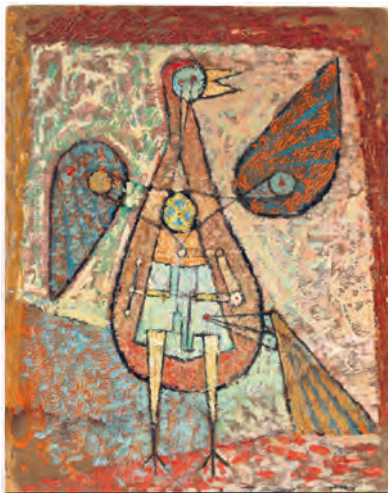
The exhibition opened on November the 3rd 1949. Aldo on the opening: *'There was a militant Dadaist mood among the artists. At the same time, the atmosphere was nervous and tense—everyone had been up too late. The place was packed'* The exhibition did not go unnoticed. A storm of criticism erupted in the press. Not only because of the works, but also because of the commotion that ended in a fight, a few days later.

It began with a performance by Dotremont. Appel: *'There was nothing wrong, only Dotremont spoke French, he didn't speak Dutch'*. Eyewitness Jan Sierhuis: *'And then a gentleman shouted, 'Sir, can't you speak Dutch?'* Constant: *'Aldo turned to me and said: Why don't we throw this guy out? And I said 'Ok, lets. 'He threw the door open, and then we picked up the chair from either side complete with the man on it, carried him out and dumped him in the corridor.'*

Van Eyck: *'At the same moment, behind me, Doucet, the Frenchman, began to fight'*. This was the start of a scuffle. Journalists reported eagerly on the exhibition and the disruptive events. Much to the satisfaction of museum director Willem Sandberg: *'It is necessary that something happens, a scandal or something of the sort, otherwise they won't write. But then it became front-page news'...* *'I never read reviews. I only look at how big they are and on which page they appear in the paper'*. The scandal is now the most striking event in the history of the group. From that moment, Cobra was the new movement that broke decisively with convention - aided by Aldo van Eyck and Willem Sandberg. Brands, Rooskens and the poets left Cobra after the rumpus.

Later, Aldo van Eyck received from Tajiri one of the four bird paintings that had hung in the Stedelijk Museum exhibition in 1949.

In 1951, Van Eyck again collaborated with the artists on Cobra's final exhibition in Liège, held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts (the building later known as the Musée des Beaux-Arts). Works by artists they admired, such as Miró and Giacometti, were also on display. Among the Cobra works was *Ville en mouvement II* by Corneille, in the mid-1950s acquired by Aldo and Hannie van Eyck, here hanging on the left wall in the exhibition in Liège.



Shinkichi Tajiri, *L'Oiseau mécanique*, 1949 lot nr. 1007





Corneille, *Ville en mouvement* 1951 lot nr. 1031

Appel and Van Eyck and the Controversy around *Vragende kinderen* (*Questioning Children*)

Even before the exhibition in the Stedelijk Museum put the group on the map, Appel had already gained some notoriety. In 1948, he had secured a commission from the municipality to create a mural for the town hall canteen. In the spring of 1949, he completed the work, titled *Vragende kinderen* (*Questioning Children*). The theme was directly inspired by the harrowing images Appel had seen shortly beforehand on a train journey to Denmark: hungry German children begging for food and money at the stations. The sight left a deep impression on him and led to a series of works centered on the questioning, poignant faces of children – a vision that would never leave him.



Karel Appel, *Vragende kinderen*. Lot nr. 1045

However, the painting provoked fierce resistance. While the civil servants were having their lunch in the canteen, they were stared at by the large, pleading eyes of the children. Complaints soon started pouring in, which found their way

into the press. The newspapers covered the uproar, and in early 1950, the municipality decided to hide the work behind a wall. This only further inflamed the controversy.

Aldo van Eyck also responded forcefully. As a friend and municipal architect, he had closely followed the creation of the work and defended Appel vigorously. In January 1950, he wrote a pamphlet, as a member of the experimental group (Cobra), under the title *Een appèl aan de verbeelding* (*An Appeal to the Imagination*), in which he sharply criticised the cowardly attitude of the municipality. In it, he contrasted the complaints of the civil servants with the praise of artists, intellectuals, and even the coffee lady, all of whom recognised the strength of Appel's work. The Dutch painter Jan Sluyters in the pamphlet: 'Actually, most murals in Amsterdam should be given a whitewash these days, because Appel's is better!' Appel himself responded playfully by sending Van Eyck back a copy of the pamphlet, with a 'questioning child' drawn by his own hand.



Karel Appel and Aldo van Eyck, *Een appèl aan de verbeelding* 1950 lot nr. 1011

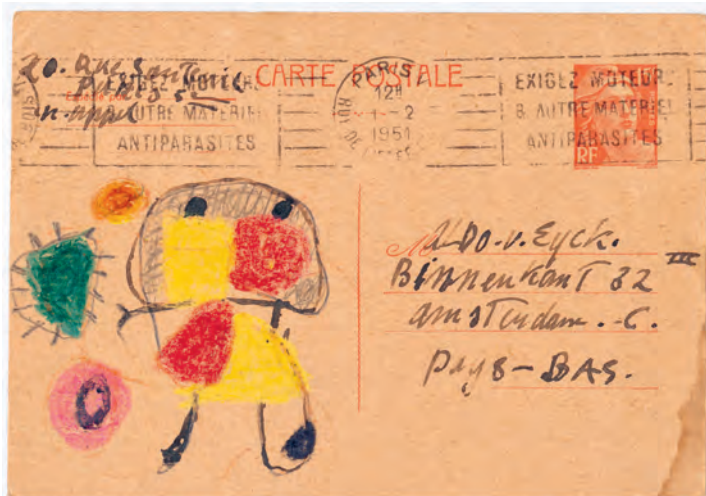
The mural remained hidden until 1959, when it was once again shown to the public. By then, Appel had firmly established his name as an artist, thanks in part to the turbulent reception of this early work.



Karel Appel, Kereltje met gestreept jasje (Quinten) 1948, lot nr. 1023



Karel Appel, Untitled, 1998 lot nr. 1022



Karel Appel, Untitled 1951, lot nr. 1041

In September 1950, Appel, Corneille, and Constant left for Paris. Aldo saw them off at Amsterdam Central Station. How important Van Eyck was for the artists is evident from the many works he, his wife Hannie, and his daughter Tess received as gifts, especially from Karel Appel. He sent to Hannie the drawing above. It reads on the cardboard: *'For sick Hanny who is now better. February 22, 1950.'* Quinten is their son.

Aldo was crucial for the experimental Cobra artists during their initial exploratory years. At his home, they could enjoy the works he had purchased, the books in his library, the knowledge he had acquired in Zürich and Paris, and discuss the new paths that had to be taken. Aldo van Eyck supported them as a blood brother, both intellectually and financially. Although not a visual artist, he was part of the group at a number of crucial moments. He was their ally and 'partner in crime'.

Aldo remained friends with many of them. On Van Eyck's 80th birthday, Appel sent the following 'fax' to him:

'My memory of Aldo van Eyck is that of a supple, agile man. He spoke that way too: long, full sentences about architecture, painting, Dada, literature, Kurt Schwitters, and Miró. Without pausing, he would move from jazz music to concrete walls, lay glass walls between the planets, and kick the stars away from his surroundings. (...) With one hand he held Venus and with the other Jupiter, and thus, waving, he did his morning exercises, lit a cigar with the fire of the sun and blew the stars from the sky. He defecated flowers of iron and bent them with his hands into metal towers, spat diamonds and sweated like a raging rainstorm. He stood up and leapt in a single stride across the oceans to teach in Boston.

With this restrained passion Aldo continues to work, think and build, all-embracing, to this very day.

*Your old friend
Karel Appel
16 March 1998'*

Aldo van Eyck died in 1999 in Loenen aan de Vecht. His collection remained intact in the family until now.

Summary of literature used:

Francis Strauven *Aldo van Eyck. The Shape of Relativity*, Amsterdam, 1994

Jean-Clarence Lambert, *Cobra: kunst in vrijheid*, Antwerpen, 1983

Esther Schreuder, *Cobra on the Canal*, Amsterdam, 2013

Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra, de weg naar spontaniteit*, Blaricum/Amsterdam, 2001

Aldo van Eyck, *Niet om het even, wel evenwaardig*, Amsterdam, 1982

Media:

The Cobra Collection, Cobra Museum of Modern Art / The Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, 2009

Digital News paper archive Delpher